

Send to Larry for final OK

Larry Gottheim

“Bigger Than Life: Between Ken Jacobs and Nicholas Ray”

It was a dynamic thrill to encounter Ken for the first time at the “Independent Filmmakers’ Competition” at St. Lawrence University in 1968. I had driven up there with five of my students from the film class I was teaching in the English Department at Harpur College in Binghamton. Ken was a last-minute substitute on the jury for Jonas Mekas, who couldn’t attend. Stan Vanderbeek couldn’t attend either, but still delivered a speech on tape that seemed pompous in the altered and fresh atmosphere that Ken had created. There was a pedantic someone from the National Film Board of Canada. I myself had submitted a film, *The Present*, a hand-made Godard-influenced narrative. In the atmosphere of an audience that was responding to the usual light titillating film festival fare, Ken was shockingly original, articulate, combative, angry, and sublimely passionate: we got swept up in his aura. Instead of the polite (but snide) discourse of academia that was already sickening me, he burst out with outrageous rude arias and sermons that were right on the aesthetic mark. He spoke what seemed to us to be already felt but never before heard nor spoken that way.

Prizes were awarded: audience favorites and judges’ honorable mentions. Participating schools in the circuit were supposed to get to screen selected packages of these winning films. I insisted on filling the back of the New York State van (those were the days when they were able to truly support education!) taking back to Binghamton every one of the submitted films from which to select our own programs. We set up two simultaneous projectors to make preliminary

selections that we would then look at closely. We discovered films by Morgan Fisher, Ernie Gehr, Joyce Wieland, and Hollis Frampton (I had known him years before when he was in Cleveland and I was at Oberlin and was surprised to discover that he now made films), and Ken's own *Window* and *Soft Rain*.

What a time that was! There was money in the University for innovative projects. In the English Department I had been able to bring the poet Anne Sexton to visit. We talked about making a film together, but she was already pursuing a project, I think with Fred Wiseman. I was running the Harpur Film Society and was shocking and annoying the audience by including Jonas Mekas' *The Brig*, Andy Warhol's *Couch*, and Godard films, in the midst of the popular "intellectual" French films with pretty actresses that the academic audiences loved and expected. Instead of the requisite "short" on each program, we showed "underground films." We showed several programs of the films we selected from the Independent Film Competition offerings.

I had been able to bring Shirley Clarke as the first visiting filmmaker in 1967. She brought her new film *Portrait of Jason* and a suitcase full of experimental films from the New York Filmmakers' Co-op. Harpur (it later got swallowed up in what became Binghamton University) had started a program of residential colleges, and I was a fellow of one of them. They had large budgets. So I invited Ken to visit for a week as a guest of that college and to participate in my film class.

In advance of his visit a box of films arrived at my house that I screened beforehand. I remember being particularly puzzled by Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (a film I was to come to dearly love and that influenced me) and also Ken's *Blonde Cobra*, that seemed so inexplicably different from the formal minimalist films of his I had previously seen. How, out of context, to understand *A Film by Bob Fleischner*?

Ken arrived with Flo and baby Nisi, and was constantly feverishly at work. His visit showed no bounds for the time of day, length of the sessions, or day of the week. We had to call the College Security to open buildings that were locked because it was the middle of the night or a Sunday with no classes. He was Tom, Tom the piper leading those students who chose to follow through a continuous changing scenario of experiences involving underground films, music, anything that came to mind, and feature films of which Nick Ray's *They Live by Night* stood out. I projected it several times during that visit. Ken never got caught up in the Godard fever of this era, and a film like *They Live by Night* was a rare confluence of interest in what in American Cinema Godard and Ken both loved. Ken was never a fan of film noir, for example.

Afterward I continued to see Ken in New York City, and went with him to the premiere of *Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son* at MOMA. Meanwhile Milt Kessler, the resident poet, had joined me in conducting the Film Society. We arranged a 24-hour session of underground films to be shown in the dormitory of the residential college that had sponsored the earlier visit. There was a frisson of illicit eroticism surrounding many of these screenings, not only here, where the students could see some filmic nudity in their dorm in the middle of the night, but even more so in screenings in New York. (I recall standing room only screenings at Aldo Tambellini's Village Gate Theater when tender films by Bruce Connor, Robert Nelson, and others were shown.)

There was an issue about the projectors. We wanted new projectors for the theater we were using that belonged to the Theater Department, but nobody supported this. I started to work on the idea of an academic cinema program. The traditional humanities faculty opposed this, but suddenly, once they smelled an academic territorial expansion, there emerged people in various departments-- English, Art, Theater-- those who never supported the Film Society or the new projectors-- who became champions of cinema, claiming expertise, and wanting to establish a

program in their own department or some kind of interdisciplinary program. I realized that the only way to break free of a stultifying academic program was to create a completely independent department. It occurred to me that Ken had the credentials that would rise far above those claimed by these faculty members with very peripheral involvement with cinema as a creative endeavor. So I proposed that Ken be considered as a faculty member, along with me, and that a separate department be established.

This turned out to be a shaky proposition. Ken had just left a very troubled part-time teaching position at St. John's University in Queens, and by no means had conventional academic credentials. But miraculously there were two things in the favor of this idea. The first was that the then President, Bruce Dearing, was a true visionary administrator-- alas, the only and last of those at this institution. It was he who a few years later brought Ralph Hocking to the college, as a kind of innovative floating creative force. (Dearing's son had studied with Ralph at Allegheny College, where Ralph taught pottery.) When Ralph came to Harpur he was practicing photography. Once he got there, he started to work with video: first portapack for the masses, and then, inspired by his friend Nam June Paik, transformational video.

The second was that Willard Van Dyke, still at MOMA, came to the campus and generously gave Ken a recommendation that trumped Ken's lack of conventional academic credentials. (At a later time those unconventional credentials would have been fatal to his even being considered.) He had already arranged to show at MOMA the premiere of *Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son*, which I was to attend with Ken a few month's later.

And so the Cinema Department was created, to some extent forced down the throat of the resistant humanities faculty, with me as Chair and Ken as the other faculty member.

The first courses were taught that summer of 1969 by myself and Ernie Gehr (I had befriended Ernie, visiting him in NY after I had seen his films at the “Independent Film Competition.”) That next academic year I had a fellowship to take the year off, a year that was crucial for the development of my own films, and Ken taught that year by himself as we hammered out some kind of academic program with the help of Robert Pawlikowski, a poet who was an administrative assistant in the Humanities (He drowned the following year, trying to save his daughters from a cruel Nova Scotia current.)

Ken insisted on a program that would create generations of students who would become disciples of one or the other of us. The core of the program would be a two- year program of film aesthetics and sensitivity. It started with “Introduction to Cinema” that filled the newly built lecture hall holding hundreds of students and continued for two years with the same teacher, with dwindling but more and more committed students from the original group. Ken started that first year, when I was on leave, and I began with my own series of students the following year. After one year of this, students could begin the filmmaking class. It started with regular 8mm (later super-8), advanced to 16mm silent, and culminated with 16mm sound that was to be my own area for many years.

One of Ken’s innovations was to use the Kalart-Victor 16mm projector that allowed one to stop on a frame and project it as a still. This was later supplanted by the constantly breaking-down, over-utilized 16mm Kodak analytic projectors. These were our constant tools for creative analysis of films. Ken had used the Kalart projector in his making of *Tom, Tom, The Piper’s Son* and his use of this kind of projector not only for analysis but also for performance continued to evolve in his Nervous System works. For me, beyond its use as a teaching tool, it led me to eventually embrace the Moviola and Steenbeck flat-bed editing machines in the construction of

sound/image compositions. Today's film teachers who have the use of digital media can hardly imagine the difficulties of forcing the awkward film-destroying 16mm projectors into creative analysis and editing tools.

This nurturing of a core of students who would have a deep connection to one or the other of us, was somewhat counter to my own more self-effacing role as a teacher. Part of Ken's brilliance as a teacher was to create a magnetic force around him, bonding those susceptible to this force to experience his own brilliant articulation as emanating from within themselves. When visiting artists came, as many did-- we were a major stop on the "underground railway" of film artists seeking an audience for their work-- Ken would lead the audience response as though the visitors were there to visit *him*, and the assembled students were invited guests to this personal experience. This continues to this day, at shows in the various venues in NYC, where, if Ken is present, he will dominate the discussion by his own fervent response. This has a positive function in creating a strong aesthetic and emotional atmosphere, so the visitor is fully engaged and not allowed to sink into a prepared canned presentation. But it also puts the students and other audience members in the situation of having to respond to the works via the filter of Ken's high voltage response, at the expense of finding their own response, even one that might remain silent. I cannot easily come to a clear evaluation of this after so many years of being in the audience at screenings where Ken is present. I acknowledge that if the audience is not aroused to some kind of active involvement the entire presentation will sink into a dull background. Ken, on the other hand, will stimulate an active involvement. But will it be the individual's deepest own involvement, or one filtered through Ken's mind and passions?

One of the mainstays of the academic program that Ken innovated and insisted upon was the Senior Thesis, a yearlong project that was the culmination of the students' creative work.

Although the program seemed to put film analysis on an equal footing with creative filmmaking, there were very few that were critical or scholarly, and not creative film projects. In those early years, the entire department (in those days hundreds of students!) would assemble in the large lecture hall, and the student would present the work, and then the faculty (at first Ken and I, and then also the other visiting or regular faculty members) would critique it before the assembled crowd. In many cases students would be terrified at the thought of such an ordeal, and would stay on for a year or sometimes more, before they felt they were ready. There were some instances of truly transcendent presentations, although oddly even many of these successful students did not continue with careers as film artists. On the other hand there were many casualties, those who never passed this obstacle and dropped out of their aspiration as film artists. Some art schools had similar programs; the San Francisco Art Institute in its glory days, for example, but they were graduate programs. The Binghamton program was unique in setting such exacting standards for undergraduate majors in a regular liberal arts program.

As Binghamton was one of the few programs that were open to all aspect of cinema art, we had a variety of visiting artist during that first period. Aside from Stan Brakhage and Peter Kubelka (who had prior relationships with Ken) visiting filmmakers included the recently arrived Czech filmmakers Milosz Forman and Ivan Passer, and the D. W. Griffith scholar and colorful Chelsea Hotel resident, Seymour Stern. Hollis Frampton, who had shown *Zorn's Lemma* as the first experimental film at the New York Film Festival and who had bought a farm in nearby Chenango County, frequently visited us in Binghamton and filmed several sections of *Hapax Lagomena* there. It seemed natural that he would become a favored candidate for a future position in the Cinema Department before the program at Media Studies Buffalo was established. Why that didn't materialize is another story.

When the opportunity finally came to select a third faculty member, there wasn't anybody we could agree on. Ken had something to say against every experimental filmmaker I thought might fit in, including Brakhage and many others whose work he had championed. There were subtle things that he questioned about their films, or their potential abilities as teachers in this situation. It began to seem hopeless. Just at this time, in a footnote to an article in *Film Culture*, I read that Nicholas Ray had been working in France, but was now out of work and living in New York. I contacted the person who wrote the article, and he gave me the address in New York where Nick was living with his future wife, Susan. As we both shared a fondness for *They Live By Night* and were willing to take a further step in making the department an innovative center of experimental cinema in the widest sense, Ken also supported the idea of contacting him. I found Nick in New York with Susan. He had just been working with Dennis Hopper on the editing of *The Last Movie*. I proposed he come to visit Binghamton, to see if he would consider taking a position where, free from the limitations of Hollywood, he could express himself freely.

His visit was in some sense similar to Ken's a few years before. Where Ken had involved the students in a non-stop marathon that respected no bounds of the usual university decorum of time and place, Nick had us bring out every piece of equipment we had, including many things that had been acquired in NY State Surplus and never used, and created a marathon series of grandiose events that dazzled everyone. Ken and I always shared a high visionary sense of the department, and this was one of the many times where that vision coincided in a powerful way, and so Nick was hired, for some in the administration were still susceptible to the idea of making the university a place of innovation.

Nick arrived during the summer of 1971, while Ken was in New York. He lived with us in Vestal, and then moved to a guest apartment in the infirmary. At the start of the school year he began the filming of a grand partly autobiographical project called *Gun Under My Pillow*. During the following academic year a great fissure arose in the department. Part of this had to do with the use of the department's equipment. Nick was using everything he could get his hands on for his project, leaving the other students at a loss to work on their own independent projects, and I had to somehow try to manage this, as I was teaching the main filmmaking classes. But more serious was the conflict for the allegiance of many of the students. Ken, with the force of his personality and brilliance as a teacher, had attracted a group of students who followed him beyond the classroom. Nick was creating a core of students who became a band of outsiders, and eventually he found a farmhouse in Vestal that became a center for their lives and Nick's film. While some of the students remained neutral-- I had many good students in this period who were outside or within both camps or maneuvered around the emotional conflicts—but many of the best students had to decide whether to place their allegiance either to Ken or to Nick.

In the following year there was one moment of joyous unity. A University-wide celebration of the arts for the entire State University of New York was hosted by Binghamton. Visitors to the cinema events included Gerald O'Grady, who had emerged with Media Studies at Buffalo as an upstart rival to Binghamton as a center for media studies, and Ricky Leacock, from M.I.T., who detested the fact that most of the works we presented were formal silent films, since his own innovations had partly to do with the use of synchronous sound. A major event was the presentation of Nick's work-in-progress, with material simultaneously projected in Super-8, 16mm, and 35mm. This was the fullest presentation of that work in all its promise. In the face of the visiting alien forces there was a feeling of great bonding between us three Binghamton

faculty artists. A gathering of the three of us and some of our students in our country place in Vestal after that screening is briefly recorded in my film, *Horizons*.

A photograph by Mark Goldstein, a student who was everywhere with his camera in this period, commemorates a more tense moment, a department meeting that, I recall, was devoted to trying to resolve some of the conflicts over the use of the equipment and facilities. As with so many events of this period, there was a theatrical aspect, as the meeting was held in the lecture hall before a large student audience.

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Photo caption: "Cinema Department Faculty Meeting, Harpur College, 1972." Photo by Mark Goldstein.

As I look at this photograph now, I see myself torn between these two powerful forces. This was not just a matter of personality conflict, as I could feel an inward pull to each, but it had much to do with the very kind of film I wanted to make. This is reflected in the tension between grand narrative and formal design in the films of *Elective Affinities*. As it happened, my lot fell with Ken, and after a further stormy year Nick left, and I continued to work side by side with Ken for many years.

But what I'm thinking about now is not those differences, but a certain kinship between those alternative rivals and eventually bitter antagonists.

Nick's genius was his ability to drive potentially gifted actors into performances that pushed them into states that transcended their previous limits. Examples abound in his films, from the close knit core of actors in *They Live by Night* to James Mason in *Bigger Than Life* and his celebrated brilliant work with the actors in *Rebel Without a Cause*, particularly James Dean,

but really to most of them, including Dennis Hopper, Sal Mineo and Natalie Wood. This would involve the relationship with the actors outside the actual filming, driving them to extremes that would lead to great performances.

Thinking about this now, I realize that Ken's greatest works are also about performance, sometimes at a second or even third degree! His films with Jack Smith are not so much about his "directing" Jack (although we will never know the dynamic of those filming sessions and the context behind them) as about re-directing them after the fact, even when the actual filming was done by another person – Bob Fleischner in the case of *Blonde Cobra*. The "Jack Smith" that we see in those early films is a double of the complex ironic persona that Smith portrayed in his performances, but he is now transformed into a creature of Ken's own complex imagination that is ruled by different ironic forces.

His masterpiece *Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son* re-directs the original performances after they were already recorded on film by someone else. Many of his "Nervous System" works also use found footage. But this is not found footage as, for example, utilized by Bruce Connor (in films that Ken loves) or by Joseph Cornell, in another key film for Ken, *Rose Hobart*. The strongest element in Ken's work does not lie in the juxtaposition of shot to shot, or in a sequence of shots. He is not primarily after a meaningful relationship between shots, or an unexpected juxtaposition for the sake of a surrealist surprise. He is engaged in an obsessive deep probing and transforming of the virtual celluloid person and performer into a realm that sublimely transcends what we can experience in normal life and performance. The resulting **STATE** brings us close to Ken's personal sense of bliss. But the nervous system works don't directly recreate what he already "had in mind." For him, too, the phenomenon can only become visible through the "machine" of the filmstrip, the projector, and the nervous system recreation. The work strives to

control us through its physical aggression, yet we bring our own nervous system into play, along with our memories and associations. In his shadow play works, he would transform his students into shadows that would be both their own performances and “projections” into a three dimensional surreal world where Ken’s and the audience’s visions would refract.

Just as Nick’s own living persona would itself be a performance to pull people magnetically into his own aura in order for them to finally become more of themselves, as well as creatures of his own imagination, this was also Ken’s role as a teacher. I had begin to think about this comparison between the two in terms of their powerful effect on their students, and my own struggle to find my way to my own individual role as teacher between these powerful magnetic fields. This was a period when I was finding my way as artist in the midst of a pull between large-scale narrative and formal work that drove my decade- long work on *Elective Affinities*. But now I see that their powerful forces had psychological charges that affected me even more deeply. As the James Mason character in *Bigger Than Life*, driven by a miracle drug, but a shadow of Nick’s own driven self, goes further and further out of control, so Ken’s meta-performances, driven by his own psychic energy, draws us deeper into a vortex of rapidly flickering experience where we lose and find our own identity.

It was the conflict between these dynamic psychic charges that drove my own film work, at first seemingly more passive, and then becoming ever more dynamic. The psychological as well as the formal elements of this conflict is one of the hidden elements in *Elective Affinities*.